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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of the University of Alaska's Rural Education Division, which was created in 1975 in the wake of the discovery of oil on the North Slope, the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and the recognition of the need for more access to higher education by native and other rural residents. Introductory material discusses the history of the division, its place within the University of Alaska system, the basic design of the division, and the priority clientele (i.e., Native Alaskans). Next, a section on the design of rural education in the state focuses on the importance of grass roots participation, joint financial support, local control, community and university partnership, and the state's investment in an extensive satellite communication system. Staffing concerns are examined next. After indicating that staffing functions are defined at the local, regional, and statewide levels, this section outlines the roles of course facilitators, community assistants, part-time instructors, program delivery specialists, program coordinators/core faculty, distance education instructors, and learning resource specialists. Next, four instructional methods employed in the division are described: (1) classes offered by local residents with requisite expertise; (2) classes offered on a regional basis by non-local part- or full-time faculty; (3) classes offered through interactive communications, especially audioconferences; and (4) independent study by correspondence. The next section focuses on several process issues, including training, ownership, flexibility, and instructor role definition. The final sections offer a brief look at costs and impact on learning. (EJV)

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DIVERSIFYING THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS

PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION
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DIVERSIFYING THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS

Alaska is the largest--although one of the least populated--of the fifty United States. Seen superimposed on the "Lower 48", Alaska stretches from California to Florida and from Minnesota to Texas, and covers 586,000 square miles, yet in population it ranks at or near the bottom of the states with less than 500,000 people. Half of that number are concentrated in and around Anchorage, and the only other sizable population centers are Fairbanks, about 65,000, and Juneau, about 25,000.

The University of Alaska system comprises three senior campuses in the three chief cities; eleven junior colleges in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and nine smaller towns; and a Rural Education unit serving the remainder of the state (40% of the territory with 8% of the population). This paper focuses on the educational design developed over the last ten years for the Rural Education division, which strives to improve the quality of life for rural citizens of Alaska while facing all the customary difficulties of distance education--extremes of distance and weather, uncertain communications systems, cultural and educational diversity, and small communities.

The University of Alaska created the Rural Education division in 1975, in the wake of the discovery of oil on the North Slope, the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and the growing recognition of the need for more access to higher education by Native and other rural residents struggling to cope with the rapid social changes brought about by these developments. President Hiatt charged the division to see that "learning take place to the greatest extent possible within the physical and philosophical framework of....(rural) communities. No American university has been challenged so greatly."

The basic design of the division incorporates a headquarters staff in Anchorage with dean and core faculty for academic and administrative support, and various specialized programs; a correspondence division and native language research staff in Fairbanks; fourteen regional centers with coordinators or program development specialists in charge in scattered rural hubs; and local facilitators and community assistants in smaller villages surrounding each regional center.

Rural Education serves a disparate clientele. Education for Native Alaskans is a priority of the division. Native Alaskans--Aleuts, Athabaskans, and Eskimos--represent 40% of the population of all the regions served, and almost 100% in some of the small outlying villages. Other clientele include new immigrants who have been drawn to the regions by opportunities in natural resource development--mining, fishing, agriculture--commerce, or subsistence-style living. Still others are teachers in the rural village schools, employees of state and federal agencies, and military personnel stationed at a number of remote sites.

While people in this service area population of 35,000 differ in

ethnic background, academic preparation, and current lifestyle, they also share some common characteristics. All live at a distance from a campus, most not even on a road system. Although desiring education, most cannot, or do not wish to, leave their jobs, home, and community responsibilities for long periods of residence on a campus. Most are mature learners, with an average age of thirty, who are looking for learning applicable to their lives. They require flexibility in time schedules in order to be able to hunt and fish for food. They also seek flexibility in pacing and in the content of their learning. Many need local support, advising and encouragement. As with rural adult learners elsewhere (Treadway, 1984), Rural Education students want a sense of ownership of the education program that serves them. It was to meet the unique needs of this range of learners and circumstances that Rural Education developed its current instructional design involving diversified instructional processes and staffing patterns.

DESIGN

The Rural Education design has evolved largely from field experience, not from the prescriptive, centralized planning that has characterized most other open universities established around the world in the last decade. Rural Education was launched with a strong focus on grass roots participation. Regional centers, with a citizens Policy Advisory Council, were established at the outset. Politically, this appeared to address directly the need for education close to where people lived.

The statewide programming capability projected in the initial design was not implemented at first by policy makers, but the limitations of this choice were soon apparent. Not satisfied with the limited scope of courses available using only local resources, residents expressed their desire for coherent programs of study which could result in the skills, knowledge, and certifications needed to help them cope with change and to make them competitive for available jobs. Over the last seven years, the regions and the Rural Education administration have joined efforts in acquiring and reallocating resources to provide centralized services, assuring greater consistency and wider access for rural residents to academic programs, while maintaining at the same time local participation in curriculum direction.

Local control remains a high political priority throughout the regions (Rural Education Task Force, 1985), and is also educationally realistic if programming is to remain regionally attuned. The resulting dual focus of regional and statewide perspectives is reflected in the multi-dimensional instructional processes and staffing patterns of the Rural Education design.

Beyond its base in historical development and current pragmatics, the partnership Rural Education has forged between the University and community forms a strong philosophical bond which undergirds the instructional design and contributes to its success. In effect, it has created a vital two-way interaction

between the University and the community that permits, in Charles Wedemeyer's term, "knowledge-as-means" education to take root (Wedemeyer, 1981). The customary one-way street from university to community neglects the important advantages of community contacts which can help to draw attention to local needs, experiences, and opportunities for the generation and application of knowledge.

The University of Alaska academic development plan which envisioned Rural Education a decade ago recognized that it would take a new philosophy of education as well as a new delivery system to accomplish the goals set forth for rural and Native education. The University/community partnership in the Rural Education model establishes the conditions for the evolution of such a philosophy. In 1982, an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, (OCDE) study of university/community relationships in a dozen nations around the world observed the radical impact such relationships could have on the purposes and processes of educational institutions. "The dynamic tension set up by the development of new relations, (creates) a tension that determines at one and the same time institutional changes, teaching reforms, and reconsideration of the fundamental tasks and the conception of knowledge and its social functions." (OCDE, 1982).

The final, significant element which contributed to the Rural Education design was Alaska's investment in an extensive satellite communication system which made audio and video reception available in every inhabited corner of the state.

EMERGING STAFF ROLES

Distance-delivered education, we have discovered, is a complex process made up of many interconnected parts and people, very different from the process of instruction in a campus classroom. Its success depends on careful orchestration among those who prepare the course (the course designers, content experts, media specialists, and materials developers), those who teach the courses (instructors and local facilitators), and those who advise students and coordinate the programs in the communities. It requires unaccustomed teamwork among those in traditional instructional roles, the development of new instructional-assisting roles, and the devising of new ways for students and instructors to gain access to library/learning resources.

To accommodate Rural Education commitment to local and statewide educational initiatives and interaction, staffing functions are defined at the local, regional, and statewide levels. (Fig. 1)

Staffing at the local village level consists of course facilitators with, at times, a community assistant and, if available, parttime instructors. The local parttime instructor in Rural Education performs as elsewhere and will not be discussed further here. Community assistants serve as extensions from the regional center for administrative purposes of conveying information and materials from and to the community at large.

RURAL EDUCATION

FUNCTIONS AND RELATED STAFFING

<u>FUNCTIONS</u>	<u>Local</u>	<u>Regional</u>	<u>Statewide</u>
ADMINISTRATION	Community Assistants	Rural Education Center Program Delivery Specialists	Program Directors & Coordinators Dean, Rural Education
INSTRUCTION	Facilitators Part-Time Instructors	Rural Education Center/PDS Part-Time Instructors	Program Coordinators UA Faculty on Overload Part-Time Instructors
CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT	A. Initial Development Public Interest: interpreted by: Policy Advisory Council Representatives Facilitators Special Interests Community Education Assistants	A. Initial Development Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS Regional Policy Adv. Comm. Special Interest in Community Rural Education Staff Learning Resources Staff B. Implement Development Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS	A. Initial Development Rural Education Center Coordinators Statewide Policy Advisory Committee Program Coordinators Curriculum Committee B. Implement Development Program Coordinators/Faculty
LEARNING RESOURCES	Part-Time Instructors Facilitators Local Librarians (School/Community) Community Assistants	Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS Part-Time Instructors Community & School Librarians	Library Learning Resources Center Director and Staff Correspondence Studies Office AK Library Network
STUDENT SERVICES	Facilitators Part-Time Instructors Community Assistants	Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS Center Secretaries Part-Time Instructors Full-Time Instructors	Directors of Instructional Support & Staff Correspondence Study Staff Admissions & Records Staff Program Coordinators
COMMUNITY	Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS	Rural Education Center Coordinators/PDS Full-Time Faculty	Dean, Rural Education Program Directors & Coordinators

Figure 1.

Facilitators are above all charged with student support. They assist with technical equipment, video, audio, and other media; disseminate course materials to and from students; monitor tests; interpret assignments; and aid student contact with instructors. Facilitators also assist in promoting discussion and in maintaining class morale and attendance.

Facilitators work with a step-by-step manual prepared by the course instructor. Two orientation sessions are scheduled for facilitators, one for general information on Rural Education and audioconferencing, and a second with the instructor to go through course-specific expectations for the semester. While content knowledge is desirable for the role, it is not a prerequisite. Rather, interpersonal skills and rapport have been highlighted with the objective of providing some of the personal interaction around the educational process, the lack of which so often has been cited as a deterrent to student success in distance education (Schneider, Klemp & Kastendiek, 1981).

Why, one might ask, did we not choose to use tutors as have other distance education programs? The answer is twofold: first, tutors with content expertise are not predictably available in rural Alaska; second, relational skills were seen as paramount to first generational learners in a cross cultural situation.

The roles of the program delivery specialist (PDS) and program coordinator/core faculty represent a splitting of the original single position of field-placed faculty at the regional level. We discovered that discipline-oriented faculty, acculturated to campus-based education, were seldom attracted to or adept at the myriad administrative and community relational tasks demanded in the field. Moreover, their disciplinary expertise was often well beyond that needed in the community. The busyness of running the local program allowed limited sharing of the expertise beyond the region. Occasional assignments to statewide developmental projects, while exhilarating professionally, often, sapped energies and productivity for regional service. Discipline experts also suffered professionally from lack of opportunities for professional development and research, and from isolation from their colleagues.

The field skills that were needed, as proved by experience, became the job description for the program delivery specialist. The PDS is a person who is interested in and knowledgeable about the local community, and someone with strong interpersonal relations and organizational skills. This person is one who coordinates delivery; recognizes need for a range of delivery; calls in resources to meet needs; assesses needs; advises and supports students; and encourages education to meet community needs.

On the other hand, the need for consistent resources in the discipline areas was translated into the program coordinator/core faculty position. This position requires wide expertise in a discipline area, interest and experience in

curriculum development and teaching which bridge applicable knowledge and theory to community needs. The program coordinator is the major connection as well to other university faculty who may contribute to outreach education.

In summary, the field-based PDS assesses and interprets needs and delivers the product. The program coordinators, based in the central office, develop the product in concert with other University and community representatives, often altering perceptions in the process. Facilitators take part in delivering the product at the most discrete course level, as on-site representatives of course instructors. Instructors develop and teach courses according to the assessed needs and to the guidelines set by program coordinators.

Distance education instructors are especially tutored for their task. A manual written by the University telecommunications center is available to them. At least one training session is held prior to each semester. All audioconferences are taped for students who might have missed the session, providing an opportunity for instructors to review their performance in the medium.

The general functions covered by staff roles are: administration; instruction; curriculum development; learning resources; and student services. All functions are shared in varying degrees at all three staffing levels, although the tasks are different. Administrative functions at the local level, for instance, may consist of posting notices, arranging for space, registering students. The regional staff are charged with planning, budgeting, fiscal operations and personnel management for their areas, while the statewide office is responsible for program development and interpretation with statewide constituencies.

Curriculum development functions are similarly shared. They begin with the headwaters of public interest at the village level, flow to regional staff and advisory committees, and are implemented in conjunction with statewide core faculty and learning resources staff at either the regional or statewide level. Increasingly, we are able to review already prepared materials to adopt or adapt or use as supplements to our own preparations.

Learning resources and student services functions are also shared in varying capacities across levels. A local facilitator or community assistant's responsibilities in these areas would be distributing and receiving materials and information to and from students. Regional staff assist students with use of microfiche catalogues, automated Alaska Career Information Service, and small reference libraries.

At the statewide level, Rural Education learning resource specialists work with course developers and core faculty or program coordinators to identify, order, and prepare materials to be used in the course. These will require, minimally, course syllabus, facilitator handbook, texts, collateral materials, and media supplements. Materials dissemination is carried out by

the materials development center. The library/learning resources staff work with the regional centers and beyond them to the local schools and village libraries to assure access to library resources for student use. Microfiched catalogs of university and state library systems provide research and browsing opportunities. Orders are placed via computer or telephone to interlibrary loan and sent out through the mail. The staff have developed and use an individualized course in library skills for students at a distance (Wood, 1985).

In spite of the range of task sharing, a recent study of instructional task differentiation within Rural Education concluded that there is a high level of agreement and commitment among Rural Education full- and part-time staff about their differentiated responsibilities (Frank & Pelletier, 1985).

INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESSES

Let us look, then, at how the instructional process also has been defined to respond to a range of local and statewide needs and circumstances.

First, classes may be offered by local residents with requisite expertise who are appointed as part-time instructors. These individuals are usually identified and proposed by regionally-based staff, and work under the guidance of core faculty. Local instructors can add a vital supplement to distance education fare. In the more populous areas, they often constitute a fairly stable continuing part-time faculty.

Second, classes may be offered on a regional basis by non-local part- or full-time faculty. In this case, the instructor travels through the region, meeting intermittently with clusters of students in different villages. When finances permit, a meeting of students in the regional center takes place once or twice per term. Interaction among students within their own region is a popular feature of this option.

Third, classes are offered through interactive telecommunications, especially audioconferences. Instructors, located anywhere in the state, hold regularly scheduled classes with students from up to fifteen villages taking part simultaneously. A local facilitator at each site assists students under the direction of the instructor. These classes are often supplemented with media presentations. As with experience elsewhere (Willis, 1983), more advanced modes of telecommunications than audioconferences have to date been too costly and inflexible to meet needs in rural Alaska.

Fourth, Rural Education students may study independently by correspondence. So far, communication between instructor and student in correspondence study has been by mail, but development is under way to introduce computer-assisted communication starting with several courses this fall. The major breakthrough will be the shortened instructor response time to student work. Presently, the mails are slow and several weeks may be required for the return of lessons.

Decisions regarding instructional mode are made in relation to: available resources; cost effectiveness; and learning style preferences. Some questions that must be answered in regard to resource availability are: is there local expertise for instruction? Are there funds to bring in non-local instructors? Are appropriate facilities available? Can the course be scheduled to increase resource availability? Questions in regard to cost effectiveness include: How many students need to be accommodated at how many sites? What is the need for this class in relation to other needs? Questions regarding learning style preferences include: Does the topic lend itself to distance delivery? Are prospective students positively oriented toward one or another learning mode? Program delivery specialists work with regional policy advisory councils to address these questions and establish priorities for regional programming.

Two early studies of Rural Education students enrolled in the AA program indicated that most students preferred local instruction if it were an option (Pelletier, 1983; Torbico & Zeulow, 1983). However, the best audioconference courses have rivalled local instruction in popularity, especially in communities where local resources are limited. The assurance of consistently available coursework leading to the Associate of Arts degree has also attracted students to the distance delivery option. Development of processes and staffing for instruction-at-a-distance has improved on-site instruction by part-time teachers.

A teacher training module, thoroughly prepared material, and supervision at a distance by core faculty provide quality and coherence to the educational program regardless of delivery mode selected.

PROCESS ISSUES

The recent study of instructional task differentiation in Rural Education showed considerable consistency in employee understanding about and satisfaction with task designation and performance. This was a bit of a surprise, actually, as the tasks were newly configured, and many performing them were new to the task. It does indicate that we have made progress on the first step in defining the differentiated roles. While welcoming this esprit de corps, we look forward to further development of the design in several areas.

Training is a critical need which proliferates with the number of persons in the process. There is a point at which the on-site contact, as valuable as it is, becomes counter productive because of the difficulty of imparting/learning all the knowledge and skills which go along with any representational function. As the facilitator handbook reads, "You are the on-site representative of the course instructor specifically and of Rural Education, University of Alaska in general." This can require extensive knowledge of structure, policy, and procedures.

Our response has been, and will be, to develop training manuals and instructional modules using all methods of communication. These range from handbooks and videotaped instructions on use of technical equipment for facilitators and part-time instructors to audioconferenced training sessions for each class. In addition, regular biweekly administrative meetings via teleconference are held for coordinators and program delivery specialists. Program coordinators also visit sites to conduct training on computers, library access, or instructional techniques.

Training must be targeted to what can be accomplished locally, and backed up by ready access to additional resources as needed. We can draw an analogy to the Community Health Aide training curriculum. This Indian Health Service -funded training, using a curriculum developed under Rural Education sponsorship, is designed to train local Community Health Aides to offer primary health care in villages far from any other medical services. A combination of training targeted to carefully analyzed needs, access to radio consultation, and referrals to urban facilities permits the Community Health Aides to attend to 90% or more of the health care problems that an M.D. could handle in the same village environment.

Ownership is an issue we have spoken of in relation to local communities, but it is also a factor in relation to academics, as corroborated in personal conversations with administrators at British Open University and Athabaska University. Regardless of the high quality of the instructional materials prepared for use by students at a distance, many instructors resist using them without modifications to make the course their own. At the University of Alaska, we have attempted to build in opportunities for ownership by allowing and encouraging instructors to adapt course materials to suit local conditions and their own preferences.

Flexibility must be maintained particularly for a small population with diverse learning needs. As the model is refined, a balance must be struck between theoretical potential for curricular materials delivery systems on the one hand and flexibility on the other (Feasley, 1983). We believe that our audioconference contacts currently contribute to this balance. They have amplified opportunities for students and instructors to engage in learning "from the kitchen table." But as we busily increase the scheduling of audioconferences, we need to be mindful of curtailing the adult agendas of the distant learner, even to the point of discarding proven techniques. One very successful class, for example, had no scheduled audioconferences, but met with their instructor only on demand from the various sites by using the telephone. The course team approach that has worked so effectively in the development of high quality instructional materials may also reduce flexibility because the process is time-consuming and costly and may become too faculty-oriented.

The Facilitator role needs further definition. Some questions which need to be addressed are: Since facilitator knowledge in the content area varies, should all courses be prepared for

minimal facilitator skills? Can instructors take advantage of the content knowledge facilitators have without confusing the roles? Is the current professional pay scale appropriate for facilitator responsibilities? Should pay be on a per student instead of a per hour basis? Can the facilitator role be made optional and only used for certain groups? Should students always go through facilitators, or be encouraged to make contact directly with instructors at times? Should facilitators play a role in advising students? If the newly developed Hotline for direct student counseling is used, what effect will this have on the facilitator role? Do different courses lend themselves to different treatments?

Facilitators when asked by survey have indicated a desire to take part in the design of courses and in grading, although they do not now do so. They have also indicated overwhelmingly their belief that the role makes an important contribution to the learning process, and instructors have in general concurred. We need to poll students for their perceptions as well.

Qualifications for the Program Delivery Specialist continue to be an issue. Recruitment criteria for this role stress experience teaching in an academic setting, along with demonstrated administrative, counseling, and community relations skills, while downplaying formal degree requirements.

Presently, University/community cooperation in the hiring process has permitted us, for the most part, to identify persons with appropriate skills and training for the positions. Most program delivery specialists in our system hold Master's degrees.

The Community Assistant role has yet to be proved. This position has been the least well defined and has had the most checkered results. It has been difficult to confine it to clerical-type activities, as the person is readily taken as the University representative with authority to solve problems or speak for the regional or central office. The value of an on-site contact must be balanced with careful training, oversight, and continued communication with the program delivery specialist.

Core Faculty tread a fine line between local control on the one hand and University standards and status on the other. As indicated in the survey, it is as often the core faculty themselves as the field personnel who worry about appropriate balance in the University/community equation. Successful core faculty must have broad general knowledge in their discipline area, keep up to date on available instruction materials, be resourceful and sensitive in creating curricula to respond to need, and be able to teach in a variety of modes and settings. They are fulltime academics whose responsibilities are entirely focused on the distance learner. They are catalysts in drawing other University and community talents into the learning process.

COSTS

Cost studies are still very tentative because of the many variables involved. Rural Education costs per credit hour in total, combining all modes, are substantially lower than those of Alaska's rural community colleges, even though the latter also use distance delivery to some extent. Within Rural Education, correspondence study is the least costly mode. However, completion rates in many correspondence courses are still disappointing, and their requirement for independent study presents a formidable obstacle for new, rural learners.

To determine costs of regionally delivery courses, travel for the instructor and, if applicable for students must be added to instructor salary. Although less extensive materials development may lower costs in this mode, time and energy limit the number of instruction sites in any semester to approximately four, thus resulting in high costs with the low average student enrollments found in our small villages.

Teleconference courses notably increase the variety and extent of course offerings while comparing favorably in costs to on-site instruction. In one comparison in 1983, 23 students at 11 locations were served at a cost of \$631 per student or \$210 per credit hour utilizing a part-time instructor and local facilitators. Conventional instruction with a part-time instructor at each of the eleven sites would have cost \$892 per student, or 25% more, assuming that qualified instructors could have been found. Costs have diminished as enrollments have increased. In the Spring of 1985, costs per enrollment averaged \$415, or \$153 per credit hour, across all the distance-delivered classes.

Only through telecommunications have we found it feasible to provide educational opportunity to all 95 villages of the Rural Education service area. As depleted state revenues translate into tighter budgets for all University programs, and as demand for increased educational opportunity continues to grow in rural Alaska, the telecommunications dimension of Rural Education service will likely expand.

IMPACT ON LEARNING

Our system is too new and our resources too few to have conducted systematic studies on student learning. Nevertheless, we have seen student interest increase each semester. As with education everywhere, much of the success depends on the course topic and the quality of the teaching. We have seen local groups become enthusiastic participants in learning. Students around the state have formed friendships in an audioconference speech class, cemented by sending videotapes of their major presentations to each other. Native villagers have been galvanized into new undertakings for their corporations through audioconference courses on the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The number of students enrolling in the Associate of Arts program by distance delivery keeps growing, including an increasing number of Native students.

An effective University presence in the community results almost every time in increased educational activity. The program delivery specialists and facilitators are catalysts for learning. The program coordinators/core faculty and learning resource specialists serve as conduits and conditioners for University resources. We feel that we have begun to encompass the new delivery and new philosophy of higher education called for by President Hiatt in establishing the Rural Education division of the University of Alaska.

We hope that at the next conference we shall be able to offer you documentation of how our students have fared in this learning design. Perhaps they will come and speak for themselves.

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